

# The ‘Mycenaean’ civilization?

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Mycenae, with its ruined palace, its looming fortification walls and echoing tombs, is amongst the most impressive and evocative archaeological sites in Greece. Many of us will have seen photographs of its famous Lion Gate (above), more still have heard of its legendary king, Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War. So important was the city in the second millennium B.C. and so resonant has it become in the modern imagination that it now lends its name to a whole four hundred years of Aegean history from around 1600 to 1200 B.C. – the so-called ‘Mycenaean world’ or ‘Mycenaean period’.

What are the implications of naming an entire civilization after a single settlement? Is Mycenae and everything about Mycenae (its art and architecture, its people, their way of living or of burying their dead) really representative of hundreds of years of Aegean culture? The name ‘Mycenae’ is ancient, as Homer attests, and survives attached to the same location, through to the present day. But the term ‘Mycenaean civilization’ is a modern invention which has been applied wholesale to a vast area of the southern Greek mainland and Crete. Is it appropriate, or does it confuse more than it explains our understanding of this part of the world in the second millennium? No doubt the inhabitants of Late-Bronze-Age Mycenae would have been delighted to know that their site would one day give its name to the entire Aegean for this period. But those in Pylos, for example, would surely have been less amused.

## Digging deeper with Heinrich Schliemann

The naming of the entire civilization after Mycenae is partly due to the circumstances of its excavation. Although digging started as early as 1841, it was the arrival of the infamous German archaeologist, Heinrich Schliemann, some thirty five years later that secured its celebrity. Motivated by Homeric epic and indeed believing the stories it told to be true, Schliemann had already excavated a city in Turkey which he thought to be Troy. In 1876 he struck gold in Mycenae – literally – as he discovered one of the richest hoards of treasure ever to be found in Greece. His broadcasting of this discovery (e.g. that he claimed on finding a gold death mask in one of the tombs to have stared on the ‘face of Agamemnon’) sealed the fate of the city within the popular consciousness. In time, the city’s name became a label, applied to other sites where similar palace-complexes, tombs, and impressive artefacts were gradually being uncovered.

It wasn’t simply a whim on Schliemann’s part which brought him to Mycenae before any of the other parts of the region. In Homer’s version of the war against Troy, Mycenae was the leader of the coalition of the various independent kingdoms of Greece. Archaeological investigation hasn’t shown any secure evidence of Mycenae having political domination beyond its own immediate vicinity. Instead, what we seem to have are a number of independent city-states (whose ‘palace’ centres are still coming to light). But it is clear archaeologically that Mycenae was extremely wealthy and influential. The upper echelons of this society were not only particularly active in foreign trade with merchants and rulers in Egypt, the Levant, and Anatolia; this elite was also remarkably preoccupied with displaying its wealth and power at home. No other graves of that period have ever yielded the stunning wealth of the Shaft Graves

at Mycenae, no tholos tomb (a circular, subterranean burial chamber with a vaulted roof and narrow entrance) has ever been found which matches the size of Mycenae’s ‘Treasury of Atreus’. There is no doubting that this centre was extremely significant in the Late-Bronze-Age Aegean.

## Seeing similarity

But is this sufficient to justify lending Mycenae’s name to the civilization as a whole? Is there any sense at all in which Mycenae was a typical city-state of Greece at that time? In terms of cultural practices, we could argue that in many ways it was. In particular, there was a common agreement among the elites of the various palace-centres in the Aegean about what counted for high status, and indeed legitimated authority: these markers included massive building works (whether palaces, fortification walls, dams, ports, or monumental tombs), frescoes and exotic artefacts, control of human and agricultural resources in the surrounding territory through an administration which communicated via an early script now known as ‘Linear B’, support from a largely shared pantheon of deities (though with possible regional variations), and last, but by no means least, a deeply embedded warrior ideology. This warrior ethos pervades the imagery of the elites, but it’s important to remember that it was also a reality of life. The elites used this shared high-status ‘vocabulary’ to compete as well as to co-operate, measuring themselves against each other by these common standards in a variety of ways. Not least, it is likely that prestige accrued as much from an ability to kill (as long as the killing was done in the appropriate manner and in the proper circumstances on the battlefield) as from the successful diplomacy that led to inter-marriage and trade agreements.

These shared ideals knitted together elites across the Aegean. Local variations did occur, some more striking than others (and Crete particularly should be highlighted here as preserving a number of ‘Minoan’ cultural features). Nevertheless, the overarching consistencies are notable, and they surely derive from the benefits that were provided by a mutually reinforcing world-view regarding the proper and natural social order of things – a common ideology about who should count as elite and why, and how they should express that high status through their lifestyle, appearance, and political powers. And one could argue that Mycenae demonstrates this just as well as any other palace site we would care to pick.

## Recognising difference

Where, then, might it fall down as an appropriate representative of its world, a convenient shorthand for a more general type of society in the Aegean? There are a number of answers one could consider, but I shall suggest only one. Although these elites in different regions of the Aegean world were using common ideological strategies for displaying and reinforcing their authority, the actual political situations in which they operated must have varied. We now have a number of centres with large-scale building structures that we term ‘palaces’. They represent various regions of the Aegean, including Thessaly, Boeotia, the Argolid, Messenia, Crete, and even perhaps Attica, if the Acropolis at Athens really was a palace-citadel, as may well have been the

case. But if we take just three of these regions and look at them more closely, we can see evidence of different political organization in each.

In Messenia, we know from the Linear B evidence that Pylos was the only palatial centre in its region. The palace's archives there reveal a complex administration with palace control over an extensive territory, divided into a 'Hither Province' and 'Further Province'. In the Argolid, by contrast, the situation must have been more complicated. Unfortunately, we haven't recovered any Linear B texts that shed light on the political organization of this region, but the very presence of two major palace citadels in this small plain – Mycenae and Tiryns – indicates that a different kind of political organization must have operated. The relationship between the elites in these palaces is unclear. Were they independent units controlling different areas of the Argolid plain – and if so, how peaceably did they share such a restricted area in comparison to Pylos' vast domain? Or were they both controlled by the same elite – and if so, how was power distributed between them?

One could then bring in to the equation the enigmatic site of Midea, a settlement located between these two major palaces which seems to have become an increasingly important centre itself during the Late Bronze Age, though not reaching the proportions of either Mycenae or Tiryns. What was the relationship of Midea to its two larger neighbours; how did three centres co-exist in this small area? Indeed, one could pose the question that if the elite at Mycenae was constantly having to reassert its superior position in the Argolid against rival elites, might this help to explain the high level of ostentation we see archaeologically at this centre, for example in monumental tombs? In other words, might Mycenae's famed wealth and ostentatious display have been partly a result of political insecurity rather than confident superiority?

In Boeotia, to the north, we again have a complex situation. Thebes is generally considered to have been the only 'palace' centre of the region, but nearby Orchomenos was also a significant site (indeed, the tholos tomb here known as the 'Treasury of Minyas' is second only to Mycenae's 'Treasury of Atreus' in size). Again in the same area we have the mysterious site of Gla, by far the largest fortified citadel in the Aegean world but, mysteriously, with no palace within it. How did these central sites relate to each other politically?

### Reconciling ourselves to the terminology

A number of common practices and cultural symbols link the various regions within what we now call the 'Mycenaean' civilization, facilitating trade and interaction and mutually reinforcing cultural beliefs and political ideologies. But there is evidence that these similarities overlay equally important differences between the various regions of the Aegean, for example in terms of their political organization. It is unfortunate that we do not know how the inhabitants of the Late-Bronze-Age Aegean defined themselves ethnically. We commonly refer to them collectively as 'Mycenaeans', but in fact we have no idea about whether they even saw themselves as belonging to a single ethnic group, let alone what name they went by. It is highly likely that

their identities were defined more by their local region or even settlement of origin, which would make it all the more important for us to look beyond the Aegean as a whole, to explore its different parts individually.

In short, we have imposed the name 'Mycenae' on a civilization that encompassed much variation across its large geographical area. This terminology is now unchangeable, but perhaps not really problematic as long as we remember that no one site can be considered representative of the civilization as a whole. As is the case with all of those who are classified as e.g. 'Northern', 'English', or 'European' today, the experience of being 'Mycenaean' must have been very diverse for the inhabitants of different regions.

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Linear B is the oldest surviving record of the 'Mycenaean' dialect. Its usage spanned the same chronological period as our favourite adjective and the same geographical area – the southern mainland of Greece including Crete. The script was finally deciphered in Cambridge in 1953 and was found to be mainly lists of materials and goods – like sheep! So if this is 'Linear B', what happened to 'Linear A'? Linear A is a script found to have been used on Crete between about 2000 and 1200 B.C. That's all we can tell you – it has yet to be deciphered!